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DIRECTORATE OF
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Intelligence Memorandum

The Soviet Decision to Intervene in Czechoslovakia

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21 August 1968
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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY
Directorate of Intelligence
21 August 1968

MEMORANDUM

SUBJECT: The Soviet Decision to Intervene in
Czechoslovakia

1. Between the end of the Cierna-Bratislava meetings and yesterday's invasion nothing happened inside Czechoslovakia to support Moscow's claim that these meetings were a great victory for Communist orthodoxy. Neither was there a notable recrudescence in Czechoslovakia of the "anti-socialist" trends which brought on the Warsaw meeting and its harsh ultimatum. Thus, we doubt that a rising sense of alarm in Moscow is the essential explanation for Soviet intervention.

2. The Soviet politburo on its return to Moscow did not summon the Central Committee to report on the Cierna and Bratislava meetings, but instead issued a communique in the name of the entire politburo saying that those meetings were a good piece of work. The Soviet leaders seem shortly thereafter to have scattered for their usual summer holidays. The Soviet press stood down its attacks on Czechoslovakia. The appearance given was that Moscow was willing at least to give the Czechs--presumably chastened by the nearness of their approach to the brink--a respite. What went on in Czechoslovakia during the short span of time since Cierna proved only that the Czechs had not understood Cierna to mean that they should put their reform movement into reverse.

3. It is not likely that the Soviets, even though they have persistently underestimated the strength of reformist spirit in Czechoslovakia expected miracles to be done by Dubcek in three weeks' time. Even if Dubcek had promised them, there was no chance he could deliver. What, then, brought the Russians, after they had decided to

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step back at Cierna, to give the signal yesterday to crush the Czechoslovaks?

4. It may be some time before we can answer this question with any assurance. On the strength of what we know now, the most likely explanation appears to be that, under the impact of internal pressures within the leadership and of importuning from its anxious allies in Eastern Europe, the Soviet decision at Cierna to give Dubcek and company more time became unravelled. This would suppose--as there seems some reason to suppose--that the Soviet politburo when it went to Cierna was divided in mind, and that the standoff reached there derived mostly from Soviet irresolution. The fragile balance in the Soviet leadership which produced the Cierna agreement has, in the space of less than three weeks, been upset in favor of those who may all along have wanted the toughest kind of policy and have made use of the time and developments since Cierna to undo the agreement.

5. If, indeed, the political scales in Moscow have been in such precarious balance, it would not have needed a great shock to upset them, but only the absence of solid signs that developments in Prague were going Moscow's way. There were few of these. In the short time available to Dubcek his efforts to demonstrate that he could insure the unquestioned domination of the Communist party had not been impressive. Czechoslovak information media remained unruly and unrepentant. There was no indication that non-Communist political elements--for example, the Club of Committed Non-Party People and the revived Socialist party--were being forced to take cover. Despite the renewed pledges of fidelity to CEMA given at Cierna, there continued to be much talk in Prague of broader economic ties with the West.

6. The visits to Prague of Tito and Ceausescu were all too visible reminders that the ranks of independent Communist states were swelling. And, finally, with preparations moving ahead rapidly for the party congress scheduled to open on 9 September, it was becoming clear that the congress

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might sound the death knell over the Czechoslovak party conservatives, Moscow's last hope for a brake on reformism in Prague. The congress would have meant not a check on the momentum of the Czechoslovak reform movement, but its confirmation. In addition, the cost of maintaining the mobilization of massive intervention forces may have created pressures in the leadership to use these forces or disband them.

7. Despite the smoothness of the Soviet military operation in Czechoslovakia, a number of Soviet political actions suggest that the decision to execute the plan of intervention came at a fairly late stage. Among these were Dobrynin's approach to the President, the convening of the Central Committee in the midst of the top leaders' vacation, the flimsiness of the legal base for Soviet action, and the failure to surface quickly an alternative leadership in Prague. Thus it would appear that Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia did not follow naturally from the Cierna meeting but represents, instead, a scrapping of the position arrived at there.

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